

# Lights and Shadows

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## Bert

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**W. V. HOGUE**  
**First Prize, Short Story**

BERT

I drink a lot. Mostly, I drink wine. I drink it from the bottle, still in the sack, not chilled, at whatever temperature the room is. I sit on my front porch and drink wine and get drunk because when I'm drunk I forget things. I forget that I was in 'Nam and got too close to a Gook mine: you know, the kind that blows out instead of up.

They discharged me on seventy-five percent disability. I had to take a part-time job in a quarry to help out with the V.A. money. There was a fellow there named Bert who didn't say much. He could work all day and not say a word.

He had been at the quarry since May, and if he had a friend, I guess it was me. I came to work one day in an old fatigue shirt, and when Bert saw me he came over.

"Third Marines?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Second Division, Echo Three, Mike Company."

Bert didn't say anything. I invited him to my house that night for some wine, and after that he would come over unannounced and sit on my front porch and we would drink. I would curse my fate and bemoan my scars and Bert would drink, not saying nothing, and go to sleep in my hammock. The next morning he would be gone, leaving the wine bottles for me to clean up.

It was in October, a Friday. The weather was warm and it was payday, so after supper I went out to the front porch and sat down on the steps, halfway looking for Bert. Shortly, I saw a blot in the distance. It was Bert, and I noticed that he was carrying a large bagful of wine bottles.

Looking more tormented than usual, Bert asked me as he walked up, "Will you drink with me tonight, Billy?"

"Well, sure, Bert. What's going on, anyway?" Opening a bottle, I said, "Bert, I got these scars."

As we drank, Bert pulled out a forty-five caliber pistol and aiming it at the sky, he began to talk.

"I was a hero, a U.S. Marine, Billy. I won a Navy Cross...."

"A Navy Cross," I said. "Damn. I just got a Purple Heart and a Silver Star. And look at these scars...."

"Billy, just drink," said Bert. "Drink—just drink—just this time."

"I was a hero, a U. S. Marine, Billy. I won a Navy Cross. I joined up when I was eighteen, the day after I graduated from high school. My daddy fought at Bougainville and Guadalcanal, and his daddy fought in the Argonne Forest. We all just took for granted that I would go right in."

He put his pistol down and went on. I figured from what he told me that he was haunted. There were ghosts only he knew about and he had tried to forget them, only to have them return, rearing their ugly heads.

I finished my bottle and went for number two. Bert picked up his pistol and kept on talking.

"I was trained by Viet-vets who told me it was my rightful duty to kill Gooks. I volunteered for 'Nam straight out of basic. I was so proud.

When I got to Vietnam, I remember seeing a whole bunch of people standing at the fence where we had landed. They're carrying signs and shouting, 'Du Ma Mi! Du Ma Mi!'

"I asked the sergeant at the reception station what they're saying. I told him it was nice for them to greet us incoming G.I.'s.

"'Fuck your mother,' he said.

"'What?' I asked.

"'Fuck your mother,' he said again. 'That's what they're saying, private. That's the worst insult they can give you.'

"'Oh,' I said. 'That's not very nice. How do they get away with it?'

"'Listen, son,' he told me. 'Out here you can't tell a good Gook from a bad Gook. Half of those slant-eyed bastards out there are probably V.C. They'll cook your food and cut your hair and fuck you one day and slit your throat the next. Never forget that, boy.'

"I give my paperwork to the sergeant and went over to the bus stop. I looked over the thousands of short, yellow skinned people. I thought most was probably V.C., maybe even all. I hated every one of them."

"Hell, Bert, I felt the same way," I slurred.

Bert reached for another bottle of wine. The cheap grape stuff was beginning to go to our heads, and Bert stood up, drunkenly waving his pistol in the air.

"It didn't take long to get settled in at my new post. After orientation, I started going out on patrols. At first, they were fun, getting into firefights, shooting Gooks, staying alive, fighting. Pretty soon, it quit being fun, and I got tired of seeing my buddies blown up for nothin'. All we would do is fight and leave, over and over every day. We would kick the hell out of 'em and withdraw and never take any territory. Then those miserable bastards'd rocket us the next night. And we'd kill them the next day and they'd rocket us the next night. Billy, I got to where I just killed Gooks to stay alive."

"Bloody bastards," I barely added.

Bert turned up his bottle and took a long drink. He tucked his pistol into his pants and carried my cloudy mind into the haunted house of his past.

"It was in July, midsummer, hot and sticky and wet. It was the kind of day that made everyone miserable, irritable. The jungle and the insects was slapping us in the face every step we took. We was on patrol, the whole damn company, when a machine gun opened up on our platoon. The two front men was hit right off, one cut in half by the gunfire, the other one doubled up, screaming, gutshot. There was pieces of flesh and bone flying everywhere, all over everything, in my teeth and nose, everywhere. I buried my face in the muddy jungle floor and started crawling toward the sound of the fire. I could hear a mortar thumping off somewhere. My blood was boilin', my arms was aching, but I kept crawling. Finally, through the

bushes, I could see the muzzleflash. I unclipped a grenade, pulled the pin, and heaved it toward the flash. It exploded and the machine gun stopped.

"We all crawled toward the Gook machine gun. There was two freshly dead V.C. I put a bullet in each one's head to make sure.

"'Let's get outta here,' someone said.

"We was really scared, Billy. We had one dead and another'n dying and we hadn't even got to the fighting yet. We would hear the mortars over to the left just agoing 'thump—thump—thump'. The lieutenant came up and said I was the new point man and to make for the village a couple of miles up ahead.

"Billy, I was so scared out there by myself. My hands were shaking. I jumped at every sound, ready to fire. God.

"When I finally got to the clearing, I surveyed the village from the brush. It seemed like it was deserted, but before calling the lieutenant on up, I wanted to check everything out. I went from one hut to another, searching them all, everything.

"I was at the back of the village, getting ready to go into the last hut, when this little girl come running out from the jungle. I musta' startled her 'cause when she saw me, she stopped and cried, 'Mama, Mama'.

"Billy, I didn't have time to think. Oh, God, I just didn't think. Before I knew what was going on, I raised this pistol and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the little girl's chest and went wild, exploding out through the back of her head, taking a big chunk of skull.

"I didn't know what to do, Billy. Oh, God, I couldn't think. I couldn't move. I could hear my heart thumping like a mortar in my head. I grabbed her lifeless little body by the ankles and drug it into the bushes. I fell on my belly and threw up. I vomited and vomited and bawled and cried like a man who has just woke up in hell."

Bert dropped to his knees, sobbing, groaning

over and over to himself, "Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God."

He pulled out his pistol and cocked it and put the barrel into his mouth. I tried to move but the wine wouldn't let me. All I could do was watch. I tried to yell, but nothing would come out.

With his thumbs, Bert pulled the trigger. The pistol clicked. He pulled the trigger again and the pistol clicked again. He kept pulling the trigger and the pistol kept clicking and I passed out listening to the clicks.

Sometime during the morning, a soft drizzle in my face woke me. Bert was gone, leaving the yard cluttered with wine bottles, casualties from the night before. I went into the house to clean up. I looked at my scars in the mirror and they didn't seem so bad.

I searched for Bert every place. He hadn't shown up at the quarry, and his apartment was empty. I tried everywhere, but he seemed to have vanished.

After a few days, I started drinking by myself on the porch. When it got too cold, I moved inside, keeping the front light on.

One evening in February, I found a small package in my mail box. The only thing on it was a postmark from North Dakota. Inside the box was a single item, a Navy Cross. ●